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ABSTRACT

An interest in the comparative quality and prestige of academic programs is illustrated by the number of recent rating studies. Most recently, ratings have been made of graduate programs in various fields. These studies are generally of four types: (1) those using subjective evaluation; (2) those using objective indicators; (3) those using a combination of objective indicators; and (4) those using other studies' results and ranking institutions with a combination of programs. The results may be useful to administrators and students in a number of ways. However, these limitations are found: the fact that alumni tend to rate their own institutions favorably, so the institution's size may affect ratings; the time lag between perception of programs and current qualtiy; ranking of only the top end of the scale; the age of the program or institution, and the resultant number of alumni in the field; and undue generalization about program quality. (MSE)

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PECKING ORDERS: USES AND LIMITATIONS

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PECKING ORDERS: USES AND LIMITATIONS*

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The quality of an institution or of an educational program is an intriguing social concept which encompasses elusive attributes mostly not easily subjected to measurement. Related to quality are concepts such as reputation, excellence, prestige, elitism, perceived value, and other ostensibly subjective judgement. The assessment and comparison of quality in education are difficult tasks. Whereas the quality of most consumer products sometimes can be objectively approximated and represented by means of certain measurements, the quality of an abstract item like education is basically "someone's subjective assessment, for there is no way of objectively measuring what is in essence an attribute of value." (Cartter, 1966:4) Through comparison of quality, one derives prestige and excellence, each of which is a state only the few rather than the many can attain.

Striving for academic excellence seems to be often a worthy and yet questionable ideal for colleges and universities, faculties and students. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the psychological and social aspects of such values and perceptions. Suffice it to note that the academia has persistently been interested in the concept of comparative quality and prestige, as evidenced by the many rating studies conducted in an effort to arrive at pecking

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orders of some sort.

Twice in the past decade, the American Council on Education has undertaken two massive studies to survey the quality of graduate programs and graduate faculties in Arts and Sciences and Engineering. (Cartter, 1966; Roose and Andersen, 1970) Researchers at Columbia University has studied the pecking order of professional schools in 18 fields. (Margulies and Blau, 1973; Blau and Margulies, 1974) Results from these studies have received wide attention beyond the academic community. As a matter of fact, they have drawn national public interest when Time, Newsweek, U.S. News, and other widely subscribed media reported the findings. Annual or occasional studies of similar nature were conducted in many fields, for instance, Business (Harris and Jefferson, 1974; MBA, 1974; Sturdivant and Adler, 1976), Entomology (Packer and Murdoch, 1974), Journalism (Clark, et al, 1972; Cole and Bowers, 1973), Law (Lewis, 1974; Kelso, 1975; Juris Doctor, 1976), Psychology (Walsh, Feeny and Resnick, 1969; Gurman, 1972) and Sociology (Wanderer, 1966; Lewis, 1968; Knudsen, 1969; Oromaner, 1970; Shichor, 1970; Clemente and Sturgis, 1974), to keep scholars, researchers, faculty members and administrators informed of the current relative status of programs in their own disciplines at other institutions. The interest in assessing dimensions of quality in doctoral education continues as reflected by the current research at Educational Testing Services (Clark, Hartnett and Baird, 1976) sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools and supported by a grant from National Science Foundation, and the September 1976 meeting held by the Conference Board of Associated Research Councils

to explore the possibility of conducting a new assessment of the quality of graduate programs.

Results from such comparative studies have often been quoted, misquoted, used and misused in a variety of settings and for different purposes. While rankings of any sort are inexact, many of the studies are rigorous research projects of interest to institutional planners and researchers.

The following sections will categorize the characteristics of the ranking and rating studies. An appreciation of the attributes of the studies will lead to an understanding of the validity and possible usage of the results. Potential uses of the results from such studies will be discussed, while the limitations and pitfalls of these pecking orders will also be addressed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RANKING STUDIES

The discussion here is limited only to studies which yield some kind of pecking orders of institutions. Basically, most comparative ranking studies can be classified into the following types: 1) Studies using subjective opinions, 2) Studies using objective indicators, 3) Studies using a combination of several objective indicators, and 4) Studies using results from other studies, and studies ranking institutions with a combination of programs.

1. Studies Using Subjective Opinions. A major portion of ranking studies is based upon personal judgement and subjective opinions of knowledgeable persons and panels of experts in the field. These include deans (Carpenter and Carpenter, 1970; Margulies and Blau, 1973; Blau and Margulies, 1974), department chairpersons and faculties (Cartter, 1966; Roose and Andersen, 1970; Gregg and Sims, 1972), employers/recruiters (Harris and Jefferson, 1974; MBA, 1974), and graduates (Carpenter and Carpenter, 1970; MBA, 1974; Juris Doctor, 1976). Usually these knowledgeable persons were asked to list the three or five schools which in their opinion are top in the discipline.* However, there are no criteria to guide them in formulating their opinion. As a result, quality in education "appears to exist in the eye of the beholder." (Elton and Rodgers, 1973:439)

2. Studies Using Objective Indicators. Attempts have been made to assess the difference in quality of education by means of objective measures. Frequency and volume of professional publication by faculties and graduates of the program have been the most popular proxy used, as in Wanderer (1966), Lewis (1968), Knudsen and Vaughan (1969), Walsh, Feeny and Resnick(1969), Glenn and Villemez (1970), Krause and Krause (1970), Gurman (1972), Cole and Bowers (1973), Clemente and Sturgis (1974), and Packer and Murdoch (1974). Besides publication counts, many indicators have been used, among them are number of graduates produced, number of faculties, size of library collection, available resources, number of Guggenheim Fellows, Rhodes Scholars, Nobel Laureates, Fellows of National Academy of Science,

*Or were asked to rate the quality of the program or the faculty members of the program, or similar questions.

Feferal research grants received, and other conceivably quantifiable measures.

3. Studies Using a Combination of Several Objective Indicators. Included in this group are studies involving the effort of the researchers to arrive at a composite index, which represents a conglomerate of objective measures, and which is hoped to be the best estimator of "quality". This is an attempt to capture and quantify what in essence is no more tangible than an image or impression. Both simple additive calculations (Carpenter and Carpenter, 1970; Kelso, 1975) and sophisticated statistical methodologies have been used to derive the composite index and arrange the pecking orders (Brown, 1967:193-198; Hagstrom, 1971; Elton and Rodgers, 1973; Beyer and Snipper, 1974).

4. Studies Using Results from Other Studies. The two American Council on Education studies have provided milestones in this field of evaluation of quality in education. The results and data bases of the study have been re-studied, interpreted, and elaborated on by other researchers in selected disciplines, as in Siebring (1969), Knudsen and Vaughan (1969), Lewis (1968), Crane (1970), Petrowski, Brown and Duffy (1973), and Morgan, Kearney and Regens (1976). There are also studies which attempt to rank institutions as a whole. Petrowski, Brown and Duffy (1973) compile a list of what they felt to be "National Universities" by aggregating the relative standings of the programs within institutions. The National Board on Graduate Education

(1975:33-37) also acknowledges 15 "leading" institutions in the United States.

POSSIBLE USES OF RANKING STUDIES

When guarded with an understanding of the pitfalls and shortcomings of the ranking studies, the results may be quite useful in many ways.

Administrators. Results from these evaluation studies can be and are being used by administrators in reviewing their programs in relation to their perceived quality among the peers. Cartter (1966:4) points out that "(i)t was felt that university presidents, deans and department chairmen could benefit substantially from having such assessments made available periodically." It was reported that a number of institutions "had used the study and its results to launch a systematic effort to improve their graduate endeavor." (Roose and Andersen, 1970:ix) The ACE report went on to point out that

> "Even though the research was not undertaken with a view to having the results used either intra- or extra-murally to afflict the comfortable or to comfort the afflicted, the published findings unquestionably have spurred some universities to give more careful attention to the qualitative aspects of their graduate-level enterprise." (ibid.)

At the time of declining enrollment and inadequate resources, institutions and programs within institutions are being confronted with the issue of optimizing and justifying internal resources allocation and reallocation. Results from the ranking studies can conveniently form the basis for discussion of program performance.

Proper use of the results serves as a feedback to the administrators and faculties in the programs. Care should be exercised not to accept the results of the studies "as is" and place heavy emphasis on the rankings.

Students. Students constitute another major group of users. In pursuit of recognition, quality and academic excellence, prospective students would desire to have information on the relative standing of the institution in his/her intended area of study. It is clear that students have found in the results of the ranking studies another factor to assist them in making decisions concerning the selection of institutions. Prospective graduate students are less likely to make their choices on the basis of casual hearsay and more likely to refer to systematic assessments of departmental and institutional quality. (Roose and Andersen, 1970:ix)

LIMITATIONS OF RANKING STUDIES

In pursuing the determinant of quality, it has been recognized that no single apprcach is without flaws. Some limitations of the ranking studies are discussed below.

Alumni Effect and Critical Mass. Since quite a number of studies have based their research on opinions of experts in the discipline, there exists a built-in ripple effect in that alumni of an institution tend to rate their own institution favorably. Therefore, the size of a program quite often influences and correlates with the ranking. It also appears that a critical mass is necessary to maintain the quality of the program.

Time Lag. There is always a time lag of many years in forming the perception of quality of programs and institutions. Blau and Margulies (1974:42) point out that " the fruits of professional training become apparent only years after graduation, so that the quality of a school's program today would have to be judged by the work of its graduates in the 1980s or 1990s." This time lag will lead to a shift in the rankings. It should be noted that what is crucial is the general standing of the ranking and not the specific rank. Due to the inexactness of the evaluation, a rank of, say, fourth in the list is not much different from a rank of, say, sixth.

Only Top End of Scale Available. Most of the ranking studies derive pecking orders for the top end of the scale. Most of the lists include only the top 10 or 20 institutions. Such rankings might engender outright comparisons and hurt many good schools that may not be at the very top in their field, particularly in a period when it is difficult to obtain much-needed financial resources. It would have been useful to have ranking or indicator of grouping such as those in the two ACE studies for institutions which are not included in the top of the scale.

Age of Program or Institution. The number of years a program or an institution has been in existence is a factor for consideration. Everything being equal, the longer an institution has been in existence, the more alumni it has out in the field and the more likely that the alumni are represented in the survey. The size of the library

collection is also dependent upon the age of the institution. A 300-year-old institution is expected to have more volumes than one which was founded at the turn of the century. Other relevant measures may be number of volumes added by period of time, annual book acquisition budget, professional and support staff relative to size of collection, and others.

Generalization. Besides a halo effect which affects the results of the ranking studies, there is another concern due to generally known perception. It is quite possible for the users of pecking orders to generalize the quality of a program within an institution based upon the ranking of other programs in the same institution. Such generalization is not appropriate under most circumstances.

FUTURE RESEARCH

With the increasing emphasis on consumerism, the quality of education in institutions will be closely scrutinized by the prospective students. Information regarding the placement of graduates, percentage of graduates onto graduate school, percentage of graduates becoming faculty, characteristics of incoming students, number of courses offered each term, etc, could be collected for almost all institutions. A composite index could then be calculated. The evaluation can include different groups of institutions. Such ratings will be very useful, especially if they are available on a regular basis, for instance, every other year. It is necessary to

point out that since different objective indicators are found to be the most important discriminants or correlates of quality in different fields (Beyer and Snipper, 1974:552), there is no assurance that any particular list of variables would be adequate to predict quality across all fields and disciplines.

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